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ECONOMY OF ATTENTION IN THEATRICAL PERFORMANCES.

BY CLAYTON HAMILTON.

ACCORDING to the late Herbert Spencer, the sole source of force in writing is an ability to economize the attention of the reader. The word should be a window to the thought and should transmit it as transparently as possible. He says, toward the beginning of his "Philosophy of Style":

"A reader or listener has at each moment but a limited amount of mental power available. To recognize and interpret the symbols presented to him requires a part of this power; to arrange and combine the images suggested requires a further part; and only that part which remains can be used for realizing the thought conveyed. Hence, the more time and attention it takes to receive and understand each sentence, the less time and attention can be given to the contained idea; and the less vividly will that idea be conveyed."

Spencer drew his illustrations of this principle mainly from the literature of the library, but its application is even more important in the literature of the stage. So many and so diverse are the elements of a theatrical performance that, unless the attention of the spectator is attracted at every moment to the main dramatic purpose of the scene, he will sit wide-eyed, like a child at a three-ring circus, with his mind fluttering from point to point and his interest dispersed and scattered. A perfect theatrical performance must harmonize the work of many men. The dramatist, the actors main and minor, the stage-manager, the scene-painter, the costumer, the leader of the orchestra, must all contribute their separate talents to the production of a single work of art. It follows that a nice adjustment of parts, a discriminating subordination of minor elements to major, is absolutely necessary in order that the attention of the audience may be focussed at every moment upon the central meaning of the

scene. If the spectator looks at scenery when he should be listening to lines, if his attention is startled by some unexpected device of stage-management at a time when he ought to be looking at an actor's face, or if his mind is kept for a moment uncertain of the most emphatic feature of a scene, the whole effect is lost and that part of the performance is a failure.

It may be interesting to notice some of the technical devices by which attention is economized in the theatre and the interest of the audience is centred upon the main business of the moment. In particular it may be profitable to observe how a scattering of attention is avoided; how, when many things are shown at once upon the stage, it is possible to make an audience look at one and not observe the others. We shall consider the subject from the point of view of the dramatist, from that of the actor, and from that of the stage-manager.

I.

The dramatist, in writing, labors under a disadvantage that is not suffered by the novelist. If a passage in a novel is not perfectly clear at the first glance, the reader may always turn back the pages and read the scene again; but on the stage a line once spoken can never be recalled. When, therefore, an important point is to be set forth, the dramatist cannot afford to risk his clearness upon a single line. This is particularly true in the beginning of a play. When the curtain rises, there is always a fluttering of programmes and a buzz of unfinished conversation. Many spectators come in late and hide the stage from those behind them while they are taking off their wraps. Consequently, most dramatists, in the preliminary exposition that must always start a play, contrive to state every important fact at least three times: first, for the attentive; second, for the intelligent; and third, for the large mass that may have missed the first two statements. Of course, the method of presentment must be very deftly varied, in order that the artifice may not appear; but this simple rule of three is almost always practised. It was used with rare effect by Eugène Scribe, who, although he was too clever to be great, contributed more than any other writer of the nineteenth century to the science of making a modern play.

In order that the attention of the audience may not be unduly distracted by any striking effect, the dramatist must always prepare for such an effect in advance, and give the spectators an

idea of what they may expect. The extraordinary nose of Cyrano de Bergerac is described at length by Ragueneau before the hero comes upon the stage. If the ugly-visaged poet should enter without this preliminary explanation, the whole effect would be lost. The spectators would nudge each other and whisper half aloud, "Look at his nose! What is the matter with his face?" and would be less than half attentive to the lines. Before Lady Macbeth is shown walking in her sleep and wringing her hands that are sullied with the damned spot that all great Neptune's ocean could not wash away, her doctor and her waiting gentleman are sent to tell the audience of her slumbry agitation. Thus, at the proper moment, the attention is focussed on the essential point instead of being allowed to lose itself in wonder.

A logical development of this principle leads us to the axiom that a dramatist must never keep a secret from his audience, although this is one of the favorite devices of the novelist. Let us suppose for a moment that the spectators were not let into the secret of Hero's pretty plot, in "*Much Ado*," to bring Beatrice and Benedick together. Suppose that, like the heroine and the hero, they were led to believe that each was truly in love with the other. The inevitable revelation of this error would produce a shock of surprise that would utterly scatter their attention; and while they were busy making over their former conception of the situation, they would have no eyes nor ears for what was going on upon the stage. In a novel, the true character of a hypocrite is often hidden until the book is nearly through: then, when the revelation comes, the reader has plenty of time to think back and see how deftly he has been deceived. But in a play, a rogue must be known to be a rogue at his first entrance. The other characters in the play may be kept in the dark until the last act, but the audience must know the secret all the time. In fact, any situation which shows a character suffering from a lack of such knowledge as the audience holds secure always produces a telling effect upon the stage. The spectators are aware of Iago's villainy and know of Desdemona's innocence. The play would not be nearly so strong if, like *Othello*, they were kept ignorant of the truth.

In order to economize attention, the dramatist must centre his interest in a few vividly drawn characters and give these a marked preponderance over the other parts. Many plays have failed

because of over-elaborateness of detail. Ben Jonson's comedy of "Every Man in His Humor" would at present be impossible upon the stage, for the simple reason that *all* the characters are so carefully drawn that the audience would not know in whom to be most interested. The play is all background and no foreground. The dramatist fails to say, "Of all these sixteen characters, you must listen most attentively to some special two or three"; and, in consequence, the piece would require a constant effort of attention that no modern audience would be willing to bestow. Whatever may be said about the disadvantages of the so-called "star system" in the theatre, the fact remains that the greatest plays of the world,—"*Œdipus King*," "*Hamlet*," "*As You Like It*," "*Tartufe*," "*Cyrano de Bergerac*,"—have almost always been what are called "star plays." The "star system" has an obvious advantage from the point of view of the dramatist. When *Hamlet* enters, the spectators know that they must look at him, and their attention never wavers to the minor characters upon the stage. The play is thus an easy one to follow: attention is economized and no effect is lost.

It is a wise plan to use familiar and conventional types to fill in the minor parts of a play. The comic valet, the pretty and witty chambermaid, the *ingénue*, the pathetic old friend of the family, are so well known upon the stage that they spare the mental energy of the spectators and leave them greater vigor of attention to devote to the more original major characters. What is called "comic relief" has a similar value in resting the attention of the audience. After the spectators have been harrowed by *Ophelia's* madness, they must be diverted by the humor of the grave-diggers in order that their susceptibilities may be made sufficiently fresh for the solemn scene of her funeral.

We have seen that any sudden shock of surprise should be avoided in the theatre, because such a shock must inevitably cause a scattering of attention. It often happens that the strongest scenes of a play require the use of some physical accessory,—a screen in "*The School for Scandal*," a horse in "*Shenandoah*," a perfumed letter in "*Diplomacy*." In all such cases, the spectators must be familiarized beforehand with the accessory object, so that when the climax comes they may devote all of their attention to the action that is accomplished with the object rather than to the object itself. In a quarrel scene, an actor

could not suddenly draw a concealed weapon in order to threaten his antagonist. The spectators would stop to ask themselves how he happened to have the weapon by him without their knowing it; and this self-muttered question would deaden the effect of the scene. The dénouement of Ibsen's "*Hedda Gabler*" requires that the two chief characters, Eilert Løvborg and Hedda Tesman, should die of pistol wounds. The pistols that are to be used in the catastrophe are mentioned and shown repeatedly throughout the early and middle scenes of the play; so that when the last act comes, the audience thinks not of pistols, but of murder and suicide. A striking illustration of the same dramatic principle was shown in Mrs. Fiske's admirable performance of this play. The climax of the piece comes at the end of the penultimate act, when Hedda casts into the fire the manuscript of the book into which Eilert has put the great work of his life. The stove stands ready at the left of the stage; but when the culminating moment comes, the spectators must be made to forget the stove in their horror at Hedda's wickedness. They must, therefore, be made familiar with the stove in the early part of the act. Ibsen realized this, and arranged that Hedda should call for some wood to be cast upon the fire at the beginning of the scene. In acting this incident, Mrs. Fiske kneeled before the stove in the very attitude that she was to assume later on when she committed the manuscript to the flames. The climax gained greatly in emphasis because of this device to secure economy of attention at the crucial moment.

II.

In the "*Autobiography of Joseph Jefferson*," that humorous and human and instructive book, there is a passage that illustrates admirably the bearing of this same principle of economy of attention upon the actor's art. In speaking of the joint performances of his half-brother, Charles Burke, and the famous actor-manager, William E. Burton, Mr. Jefferson says:

"It was a rare treat to see Burton and Burke in the same play: they acted into each other's hands with the most perfect skill; there was no striving to outdo each other. If the scene required that for a time one should be prominent, the other would become the background of the picture, and so strengthen the general effect; by this method they produced a perfectly harmonious work. For instance, Burke would remain in repose, attentively listening while Burton was delivering some humor-

ous speech. This would naturally act as a spell upon the audience, who became by this treatment absorbed in what Burton was saying, and having got the full force of the effect, they would burst forth in laughter or applause; then, by one accord, they became silent, intently listening to Burke's reply, which Burton was now strengthening by the same repose and attention. I have never seen this element in acting carried so far, or accomplished with such admirable results, not even upon the French stage, and I am convinced that the importance of it in reaching the best dramatic effects cannot be too highly estimated. It was this characteristic feature of the acting of these two great artists that always set the audience wondering which was the better. The truth is there was no 'better' about the matter. They were not horses running a race, but artists painting a picture; it was not in their minds which should win, but how they could, by their joint efforts, produce a perfect work."

I am afraid that this excellent method of team play is more honored in the breach than in the observance among our eminent actors of the present time. When Richard Mansfield played the part of Brutus, he destroyed the nice balance of the quarrel scene with Cassius by attracting all of the attention of the audience to himself, whereas a right reading of the scene would demand a constant shifting of attention from one hero to the other. When Joseph Haworth spoke the great speech of Cassius beginning, "Come, Antony, and young Octavius, come!" he was shrouded in the shadow of the tent, while the lime-light fell full upon the form of Brutus. This arrangement so distracted the audience from the true dramatic value of the scene that neither Mr. Mansfield's heroic carriage, nor his eye like Mars to threaten and command, nor the titanic resonance of his ventriloquial utterance, could atone for the mischief that was done.

In an earlier paragraph, we noticed the way in which the "star system" may be used to advantage by the dramatist to economize the attention of the audience; but it will be observed, on the other hand, that the same system is pernicious in its influence upon the actor. A performer who is accustomed to the centre of the stage often finds it difficult to keep himself in the background at moments when the scene should be dominated by other, and sometimes lesser, actors. Artistic self-denial is one of the rarest of virtues. This is the reason why "all-star" performances are almost always bad. A famous player is cast for a minor part; and in his effort to exploit his talents he violates the principle of economy of attention by attracting undue notice to a subordinate feature of the performance. That's villainous,

and shows a most pitiful ambition, as Hamlet truly says. A rare proof of the genius of M. Coquelin was given by his performances of Père Duval and the Baron Scarpia in support of the Camille and Tosca of Mme. Sarah Bernhardt. These parts are both subordinate; and, in playing them, M. Coquelin so far succeeded in obliterating his own special talents that he never once distracted the attention of the audience from the acting of his fellow star. This was an artistic triumph worthy of ranking with the same actor's sweeping and enthralling performance of Cyrano de Bergerac,—perhaps the greatest acting part in the history of the theatre.

A story is told of how Sir Henry Irving, many years ago, played the rôle of Joseph Surface at a special revival of "The School for Scandal" in which most of the other parts were filled by actors and actresses of the older generation, who attempted to recall for one performance the triumphs of their youth. Now Joseph Surface is a hypocrite and a villain; but the youthful grace of Mr. Irving so charmed a lady in the stalls that she said she "could not bear to see those old unlovely people trying to get the better of that charming young man, Mr. Joseph." Something must have been wrong with the economy of her attention.

Another story is whispered abroad; but I cannot vouch for its truthfulness. It is said that one evening when M. Maurel was performing a supporting part in "Faust," he did a brilliant piece of incidental acting while M. Jean de Reszke was singing one of the solos of the hero. When Maurel made his exit, he found himself face to face with M. Edouard de Reszke, who approached him like the rugged Russian bear. Edouard grabbed the offender by the collar. "Maurel," he said, "if you do that again when my brother is singing, I shall break every bone in your damned body!" At the next performance, Herbert Spencer's principle was rigidly observed.

The chief reason why mannerisms of walk or gesture or vocal intonation are objectionable in an actor is that they distract the attention of the audience from the effect he is producing to his method of producing that effect. Mr. Mansfield's peculiar manner of pumping his voice from his diaphragm and Sir Henry Irving's corresponding system of ejaculating his phrases through his nose gave to the reading of those great artists a rich metallic resonance that was vibrant with effect; but a person hearing either of those

actors for the first time was often forced to expend so much of his attention in adjusting his ears to the novel method of voice production that he was unable for many minutes to fix his mind upon the more important business of the play. An actor without mannerisms, like Adolf von Sonnenthal, is able to make a more immediate appeal.

III.

At the first night of Mr. E. H. Sothern's "Hamlet," in the fall of 1900, I had just settled back in my chair to listen to the reading of the soliloquy on suicide, when a woman behind me whispered to her neighbor, "Oh look! There are two fireplaces in the room!" My attention was distracted, and the soliloquy was spoiled; but the fault lay with the stage-manager rather than with the woman who spoke the fatal words. If Mr. Sothern was to recite his soliloquy gazing dreamily into a fire in the centre of the room, the stage-manager should have known enough to remove the large fireplace on the right of the stage.

Mme. Sarah Bernhardt, when she acted "Hamlet" in London in 1899, introduced a novel and startling effect in the closet scene between the hero and his mother. On the wall, as usual, hung the counterfeit presentments of two brothers; and when the time came for the ghost of buried Denmark to appear, he was suddenly seen standing luminous in the picture-frame which had contained his portrait. The effect was so unexpected that the audience could look at nothing else, and thus Hamlet and the queen failed to get their proper measure of attention.

These two instances show that the necessity of economizing the attention of an audience is just as important to the stage-manager as it is to the dramatist and the actor. In the main, it may be said that any unexpected innovation, any device of stage-management that is by its nature startling, should be avoided in the crucial situations of a play. Professor Brander Matthews gave an interesting illustration of this principle in his article on "The Art of the Stage-Manager," in *THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW* for February, 1904. He said:

"The stage-manager must ever be on his guard against the danger of sacrificing the major to the minor, and of letting some little effect of slight value in itself interfere with the true interest of the play as a whole. At the first performance of Mr. Bronson Howard's 'Shenandoah,' the opening act of which ends with the firing of the shot on Sumter, there

was a wide window at the back of the set, so that the spectators could see the curving flight of the bomb and its final explosion above the doomed fort. This scenic marvel had cost time and money to devise; but it was never visible after the first performance, because it drew attention to itself, as a mechanical effect, and so took off the minds of the audience from the Northern lover and the Southern girl, the Southern lover and the Northern girl, whose loves were suddenly sundered by the bursting of that fatal shell. At the second performance, the spectators did not see the shot, they only heard the dread report; and they were free to let their sympathy go forth to the young couples."

Nowadays, perhaps, when the theatre-going public is more used to elaborate mechanism on the stage, this effect might be attempted without danger. It was owing to its novelty at the time that the device disrupted the attention of the spectators.

But not only novel and startling stage effects should be avoided in the main dramatic moments of a play. Excessive magnificence and elaborateness of setting are just as distracting to the attention as the shock of a new and strange device. When "*The Merchant of Venice*" was revived at Daly's Theatre some years ago, a scenic set of unusual beauty was used for the final act. The gardens of Portia's palace were shadowy with trees and dreamy with the dark of evening. Slowly in the distance a round and yellow moon rose rolling, its beams rippling over the moving waters of a lake. There was a murmur of approbation in the audience; and that murmur was just loud enough to deaden the lyric beauty of the lines in which Lorenzo and Jessica gave expression to the spirit of the night. The audience could not look and listen at the self-same moment; and Shakespeare was sacrificed for a lime-light. A wise stage-manager, when he uses a set as magnificent, for example, as the memorable garden scene in Miss Viola Allen's production of "*Twelfth Night*," will raise his curtain on an empty stage, to let the audience enjoy and even applaud the scenery before the actors enter. Then, when the lines are spoken, the spectators are ready and willing to lend them their ears.

This point suggests a discussion of the advisability of producing Shakespeare without scenery, in the very interesting manner that has been employed in recent seasons by Mr. Ben Greet's company of players. Leaving aside the argument that with a sceneless stage it is possible to perform all the incidents of the play in their original order, and thus give the story a greater

narrative continuity, it may also be maintained that with a bare stage there are far fewer chances of dispersing the attention of the audience by attracting it to insignificant details of setting. Certainly, the last act of the "Merchant" would be better without the mechanical moonrise than with it. But, unfortunately, the same argument for economy of attention works also in the contrary direction. We have been so long used to scenery in our theatres that a sceneless production requires a new adjustment of our minds to accept the unwonted convention; and it may readily be asserted that this mental adjustment disperses more attention than would be scattered by elaborate stage effects. At Mr. Greet's first production of "Twelfth Night" in New York without change of scene, many people in the audience could be heard whispering their opinions of the experiment,—a fact which shows that their attention was not fixed entirely upon the play itself. On the whole, it would probably be wisest to produce Shakespeare with very simple scenery, in order, on the one hand, not to dim the imagination of the spectators by laborious magnificence of setting, and, on the other, not to distract their minds by the unaccustomed conventions of a sceneless stage.

What has been said of scenery may be applied also to the use of incidental music. So soon as such music becomes obtrusive, it distracts the attention from the business of the play; and it cannot be insisted on too often that in the theatre the play's the thing. But a running accompaniment of music, half-heard, half-guessed, that moves to the mood of the play, now swelling to a climax, now softening to a hush, may do much toward keeping the audience in tune with the emotional significance of the action.

A perfect theatrical performance is the rarest of all works of art. I have seen several perfect statues and perfect pictures; and I have read many perfect poems: but I have never seen a perfect performance in the theatre. I doubt if such a performance has ever been given, except, perhaps, in ancient Greece. But it is easy to imagine what its effect would be. It would rivet the attention throughout upon the essential purport of the play; it would proceed from the beginning to the end without the slightest distraction; and it would convey its message simply and immediately, like the sky at sunrise or the memorable murmur of the sea.

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